

Loneliness: A Major Theme In The Short Stories of

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala

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Abstract

The genesis of the Indian short story can be traced to the Puranas, the Panchatantra and the Jatakas tales. The modern Indian short story in English came at a time when it had already broken from the narrow confines of the origin and extended itself to encompass life in all its complexity. Even as early as the turn of the century writers found defining the short story a different task. Brander Matthews in "*The Philosophy of the Short Story*" is at pains to show the many aspects in which the short story differs from the novel: Unity of impression, Conciseness, Sense of form etc. But the differences between the novel and the short story differs from the novel in its significance of effect and in its brevity. Every good story has a mystery of allurement. As we understand the story better, it is likely that the mystery does not necessarily decrease rather it simply grows more beautiful. As far as India is concerned, the short story continue to enjoy an assured place as it has always done, with same minor vibrations. The short story writer in India has come a long way since the turn of the century, when he first discovered the medium, even be it under the influence of Chekhov or Maupassant or Gorky or O' Henry.

Key Words: *Genesis, Complexity, Mystery, Allurement vibrations, Vitality, Sensibility, Intensity, Interaction Enlightened, Symbolised, Degradation, Suppression, Boredom, Loneliness.*

Introduction:

Today, the Indian short story writer unlike Western stands firmly on his two feet on the solid ground below. He grapples life in the raw by its forefeet and pins it down in his work. He is the very heart and soul of the story he is writing about. He is now the authentic voice. He writes with vitality, warmth and honesty about human relationships, with a full standing of life. In the process, he does not overlook the fact that literature is as much as it is life and tries to raise the work to the level of art. (Panorama P-XIV-1986)

The Indian English short story is slightly less than a hundred years old. During its near century old existence, the Indian English short story has exhibited considered variety of theme, mode and tone. It is matter of language of adapting the English language as a medium of expression to convey Indian thought and sensibility. The short story seems to impose certain conditions, intensity, concentration, suggestiveness and surprise. However, it also allows a variety of approaches from fantasy and fairy tale at one end to journalism and social documentation at the other.

Literature is the reflection of man's life. It is studied primarily on account of its deep and lasting human significance. The readers are brought to a large, close and fresh relations with life through literature. The short story as a literary genre is something distinctive and specific. It is like other forms of literature authentically and convincingly projects life with its colourful varieties as well as dark shades. In a short story the writer not only deals with subjects related to life and death, sin and destiny, man's relations with God, duties of people man's role in society and his better understanding the values of life. Besides, the beauty of expression and the real representation of life, moral lessons are given through this form. The language of the short story should be a model of economy. Every word in it should contribute for its effect. Short story is a favourite form of present day writing.

Hence the short story has quickly established in India through skilled exponents who provided the models Rabindranath Tagore was widely read in translation from Hindi, along with R.K. Narayan, Khushwant Singh, Kamala Das, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Shobha De have also handled this form.

Jhabvala is an Indian Parsi architect and later head of the school of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. In 1975 Jhabvala moved to New York and divided her time between India and the United States. In 1986, she became naturalised citizen of the United States. Ruth Praver was born in Cologne, Germany to Jewish parents. During the World War II, Praver lived at Hendon in London, experience the Blitz and began to speak English rather than German. Charles Dickens works and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* kept her company through the war years and in 1948, she became a British Citizen in 1948.

Her literary works well received with C.P.Snow, Rumer Godden and V.S. Pritchett describing her work as "the highest art", "a balance between subtlety, humour and beauty" and as being Chekhovian in its detached sense of conic self-delusion.

Jhabvala initially was assumed to be an Indian among the reading public because of her perceptive portrayals of the nuances of Indian lifestyles. Later the revelation of her true identity led to falling sales of her books in India and made has a target of accusations about "her old-fashioned colonial attitudes. Jhabvala's last published story was "The Judge's Will" which appeared in *The New Yorker* on 25 March 2013.

Jhabvala moved to New York City in 1975 and lived there until her death in 2013, becoming a naturalised citizen of the United States in 1986. She continued to work and many of her works including *In search of Love and Beauty* (1983), *Three Continents* (1987), *Sharels of Memory* (1995) and *East into Upper East: Plain Tales From New York and New Delhi* (1998) portray the lives and predicaments of immigrants from Post-Nazi and Post-World War Europe. Many of these works feature India as a setting where her characters go in search of spiritual enlightenment only to emerge defracted and exposed to materialistic pursuits of the East. The New Work Times Review of Books chose her *Out of India* (1986) as one of the best reads of that year. In 1984, she was awarded a *Mac Arthur Fellowship*. In 2005 she published *My Nine Lives: Chapters of a Possible Past* with illustrations by her husband and the book was described as "her most autobiographical fictions to date.

Ruth Praver lived in India for 24 years from 1951. Her first novel, *To Whom She will*, published in 19855. It was followed by *Esmond in India* (1957), *The Householder* with a screenplay by Jhabwala, was filmed in 1962 by Merchant and Ivory. During her years

in India. She wrote scripts for the Merchant – Ivory due for the Guru (1969) and *The Autobiography of a Princess* (1975) she collaborated with Ivory for the screenplays for Bombay Talkie (1970) and *ABC After – School Specials: Williams - The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* (1973).

Jhabvala “removed ill at ease with India and all that it brought into her life”. She wrote in an autobiographical essay, *Myself in India* published in *London Magazine*) that she found “the great animal of poverty and backwardness” made the idea and sensation of India intolerable to her, a “Central European with an English Education and a deplorable tendency to constant self-analysis” [10-11]. Her early works in India dwell on the themes of romantic love and arranged marriages and are proteases of the social mores, idealism and chaos of the early decades of Independent India.

Ruth Prawar Jhabwala short stories can be divided in three groups: stories about Indians, stories about Europeans living in India and stories about the interaction between Indian and Europeans. Jhabvala has so far published four collections of short stories originally published in magazines such as *Encounter*, *London Magazine*, *New Yorker* *Cosmopolitan* and *The Cornhill Magazine*.

Her stories about Indians deal with family bound, brash social climbers, misfits, mystics, garrulous women, drifters and failures. Her first collection of stories is called *Like Birds like Fishes*. It contains eleven stories. The first story, “*The Old Lady*” is about an old lady whose daughter Leila wants to divorce her husband. Leila thinks that “divorce is a natural thing in only enlightened society”. But the old lady invites Leila’s husband to lunch in the hope that such a meeting might bring about a reconciliation. Her husband too does not want divorce. But Leila is bent upon wrecking her marriage just because divorce is fashionable in Europe. She thinks that her mother is old fashioned and her mother feels quite helpless against the obstinacy of her daughter and takes recourse to praying. In this story, Jhabvala contrast two attitudes to marriage, the traditional represented by the old woman and the pseudo-modern, symbolised by Leila. The old lady knows her daughter is wrong and that she would come to grief. She wants to save her but finds herself unable to do so.

In another story “*The Widow*”, Durga is married to a decrepit old man. She resents him and prays every day for him to die. When he dies, he leaves a lot of property to her. Durga’s relatives want her to shave her head and lead to austere life. Durga refuses to comply and starts managing her property shrewdly. But she is overcome with boredom and smoulders with suppressed desires. In order to divert her mind from her unfulfilled desires, she starts taking interest in religion. But soon she finds that her religious pursuits do not help her much. Durga finds herself attracted to Govinda, a young and well-built youth who lives in one of her quarters. She starts enjoying his company and giving him presents. The story highlights Durga’s sexual starvation and the various forms through which it becomes manifest in her conduct.

The other stories about Indians in *Like Birds Like Fishes* deal with the parties of the wives of Government officials, the self congratulatory and self indulgent ways of the well-too-do, the usual talk about culture, committees and so on. The cumulative effect of these stories is an awareness of the Indian society which is inhibited by its age-old complicated tradition of manners breaking under the impact of western education, which in turn inhibits its members, constricts their freedom and renders them helpless.

Jhabwala’s latest collection *How I Became a Holy Mother* contains nine of her stories. In a story called “*Prostitutes*”, Tara is a concubine of decrepit Mukund Sahib, whom she has to tend, in spite of hating him. She has a lover who is faithless, a daughter who keeps making new demands on her. Her mother is left with no mate in her old age. Tara oscillates between resentment and in depicting moral squalor, Jhabwala depicts social reality and a mode of existence. Jhabwala describes in this story the sordid world of prostitutes which is full of loneliness, anxieties and dangers.

Another story “*Desecration*” depicts the sad story of Sofia, who is thirty years younger than Raja Sahib, her husband. Both live in an isolated house. Raja Sahib dates on her and never lets her get out of his sight. He writes plays and reads them out to her. But living in a Raja Sahib in a big house is not easy. So she occasionally suffers from nervous frustrations. Of course, Raja Sahib attends to her most affectionately but that hardly matters. Then comes Bakhtawar Singh the Superintendent of police. They meet first at a party and then at a desolate place and fall for each other – Boredom and loneliness makes

Sofia desperate. So she starts visiting police Quarters. Bakhtawar Singh uses her and insults her as he likes and there is nothing Sofia can do to stop her degradation.

Hence "*Descretion*" is a sad story of a sensitive lonely woman married to an old person. Her husband provides her everything but not the sexual need. The suppression of sexual desires leads to violent explosion and she finds herself in the power of a sex maniac. She is of afraid of her husband who, it is said, never forgave people and she cannot resist Bakhtawar though he insults her. Sofia is in the power of forces which she cannot control and which are destroying her.

CONCLUSION

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala's stories are, as our social life is full of petty things – the parties of the wives of government officials, the banal talk about culture and committees. She catches the hours of the passing day. The hour is her measure. It is in this respect she shows resemblance to the Russian masters especially to checkhov. Like Checkhov, she deals with boredom and loneliness which culminates in sexual abandon, imbecility and helplessness. Loneliness, frustration, humiliation, patience, acceptance including the acceptance of other people's and awefulness – slow rot and degradation are some of her major themes.

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